

8.03.2007 - Compensation to Equal Sacrifice

The House of Representatives, with my support, has recently passed several bills that will benefit West Virginia veterans. Those bills will accomplish several things, including increasing funds for financial and housing assistance, enhancing rural transportation programs, expanding mental health services for veterans, and cutting co-payments veterans must pay for hospice care.

The House also passed legislation I cosponsored, recognizing the service of thousands of merchant seamen who served during World War II, but were not considered "official" members of the U.S. Armed Forces, and, therefore, are denied "active duty" benefits through the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Merchant Marines suffered the second highest casualty rates during World War II, and I applaud the House for finally correcting a mistake that has lingered for over 50 years by passing legislation to recognize these veterans and provide them with the benefits that they deserve. As Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower said in 1944, "When final victory is ours there is no organization that will share its credit more deservedly than the Merchant Marine."

On order to continue honoring to the fullest extent the bravery and sacrifice of our nation's servicemen and women, I have introduced two bills to extend eligibility for full pension benefits to veterans who have been unjustly denied them. I have tried twice before to attract the long-overdue attention of the Congress to the needs and sacrifices of many neglected veterans. This year, I am pleased to say, the Congress has finally taken note, as I was invited to testify before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs in support of my legislation.

For centuries, we have witnessed the personal courage and sacrifice made by millions of Americans who have served our country. They have done so proudly and without hesitation, to protect our freedom and our way of life, and to help ensure peace in numerous unstable regions around the globe. These individuals represent the best of America, and I believe it is imperative that the United States Congress do everything in its power to honor them when they return home from service.

Under current law, veterans may only meet eligibility requirements to draw a full pension if they have served in combat during a declared period of war. While this method was sufficient for the majority of veterans who served during America's 20th century engagements, America's evolving role in conflicts abroad has necessitated the expansion and adaptation of our veterans benefits programs, including those pertaining to pensions.

My first bill, H.R.

1900, would extend eligibility for pension benefits through the Department of Veterans Affairs to veterans who have received the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal. This medal was established in 1961 by President John F. Kennedy to recognize the service of American veterans in light of the United States' expanding involvement in conflicts outside the scope of a "period of war." This medal is still awarded today to those men and women who have served in hostile regions, but not all of these courageous veterans receive full benefits. My legislation would correct this injustice.

My second bill, H.R.

1901, would benefit 27,000 veterans who facilitated the overthrow of General Manuel Noriega in Panama, as well those who served during the 1983 conflict in Lebanon, where America lost 241 Marines to a suicide attack on the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut. Though these soldiers, and those who served during the additional conflicts covered by this bill, were clearly at risk, they are currently not eligible to receive veterans' pensions. Nonetheless, in these cases, danger was faced, bravery was shown, and American lives were lost.

It is my goal to more closely align the sacrifices made by these men and women with the compensation they deserve. As President Ronald Reagan, in his remarks to the nation on the conflict in Lebanon and Grenada stated, "They gave their lives in defense of our national security every bit as much as any man who ever died fighting in a war." These sentiments ring true for every man and woman who has stood in harm's way for the protection of our freedom.

I believe all Americans would agree that veterans who put their lives on the line and suffer losses during undeclared times of conflict are admirable and deserving of the thanks of a grateful nation. It is time we recognized this fact and expanded pension benefits to more of our veterans who have exemplified the courage and bravery of service in our Armed Forces.